

Student Box # 216

**An Exegetical Paper
Regarding
Philippians 3:1-16**

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Philippians 3 (Personal Translation)

- 1 And now, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! To write these same things again is not troublesome to me, but a safeguard to you.
- 2 Pay attention to the dogs. Pay attention to the workers of evil. Pay attention to the mutilation;
- 3 For we are the circumcision, the ones serving the Spirit of God and boasting in Christ Jesus and not having been persuaded in the flesh,
- 4 though I might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone thinks (himself to have reason) to have confidence in the flesh, I do much more:
5 circumcision on the eighth day, from the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; regarding the law a Pharisee;
6 according to zeal, persecuting the church; according to righteousness which God requires the in law, being blameless
7 but what things were gains to me, those I regarded as loss for Christ
8 On the contrary, I regarded all to be loss in view of the surpassing value of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whom I have suffered all things, and I consider them dung in order that I may gain Christ
9 and that I may be found in Him, not having my righteousness from law, but through the faith of Christ, the righteousness from God on the basis of faith;
10 to know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering, being conformed unto His death
11 if in some way I might attain to the resurrection from the dead.
12 Not that I have already received or have been already made perfect, but I keep seeking after so that I might obtain that for which I was made one's own by Christ Jesus
13 My brothers, I reckon that I myself have not yet obtained: instead, forgetting those things behind and stretching forward to the things ahead,
14 I seek after the goal-marker of the prize of the upwards calling of God in Christ Jesus.
15 Therefore, as many as are complete, let us think [similarly]; and if in anything you all think otherwise, this also God will reveal to you.
16 Nevertheless, in that [which] we have attained, in the same are we to walk.

Introduction

Every good parent desires the best for his or her child. Furthermore, a praiseworthy mentor is one who guides, listens, protects, and counsels. These values are reflected in Paul as he addresses his friends, the Church in Philippi, in Philippians 3:1-16. His main emphasis in this passage is to provide strong commentary to the believers in Jesus Christ regarding the real goal of life. This passionate plea to his endeared friends is certainly that of a mentor who desires to see the pursuits of his disciples refined, protected, and attained. One remarkable aspect of this section, as well as the entire book of Philippians, is that in the midst of his imprisonment in Rome¹, Caesarea², or perhaps Ephesus³, Paul would be so mindful both of this beloved congregation of believers and of the concept of joy and rejoicing. Yet, it is in the midst of his suffering that these areas are exactly to where Paul's words were transmitted and where his thoughts were focused.

¹ Daniel B. Wallace, "Philippians: Introduction, Argument, and Outline," <http://www.bible.org/docs/soapbox/photl.htm>, accessed 07/05/2004.

² Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary 43: Philippians*, (Waco. Word Books, 1983), xxxvii.

³ William Hendrikson, *New Testament Commentary: Philippians*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962), 22.

Exegesis

In the passage under consideration, it is very clear through his usage of the various rhetorical devices such as repetition and sarcasm that Paul, in a definitive way, is seeking for resolutions regarding the issues that he is addressing to find residence within the hearts of his readers.

And now, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! To write these same things again is not troublesome to me, but a safeguard to you.
Pay attention to the dogs. Pay attention to the workers of evil. Pay attention to the mutilation;

First, Paul begins this section with the phrase, τὸ λοιπόν, which, being understood in this passage as a transition marker rather than a concluding statement, designates the ending of one train of thought and the advancing onward to another.⁴ Paul also continues with a prevalent theme found throughout Philippians as he writes χαίρετε ἐν κυρίῳ. With this recurrent notion of joy and rejoicing in the Lord in his mind, he makes mention that the repetitiveness of using such statements⁵ in his writing is no trouble for him to perform and is instead, meant as both a safeguard and a reminder for his readers.⁶ There has been some suggestion that this comment necessitates a shift to either other writers or additional writings but the passage is considered by most theologians as a simple commentary that Paul is taking the time to write repetitiously concerning these very important matters.⁷

⁴ Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 123.

⁵ It should be noted that not all theologians are in agreement with this point. Some have suggested that Paul was reiterating his call for unity; others have suggested otherwise. Paul's exact intent is unknown but it is the opinion of this author that Paul is referring to his comments concerning 'joy' and 'rejoicing.'

⁶ F. F. Bruce, *New International Biblical Commentary- Philippians* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1989), 102.

⁷ Morna Hooker, "Philippians," *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 108.

As long as there has been a concept of God within the mind of sin-plagued man, there has been an opposing counterfeit for that PERCEPTION of God. In like manner, there have also been counterfeits for the THINGS of God; these poor imitations have most certainly been intended for the detriment of God's people. It is in the midst of this 'thank-you letter' to the Philippians that Paul so addresses some of these issues. He does this initially by bringing his audience to an awareness of those whom he refers to as the "false circumcision." Whether these individuals were Judaizers (Jewish Christians⁸) or Jews⁹ is highly debated; yet it is known that these were radical Hebrews who were attempting to lure believers away from their simple faith commitment to Christ by presenting them with an objective, legalistic system. This system was that by which they could obtain a standard of pseudo-righteousness by following a set of rituals or by performing a series of tangible objectives. Paul's obvious desire for his friends, however, was that they would be highly aware of these deceitful workers and that the Philippians would continue to cling to their simple faith commitment to Christ with a renewed hope and vision. Paul, therefore, takes the time to alert his friends regarding these Hebrew radicals through his usage of anaphora in the triple exclamation of the imperative, Βλέπετε.¹⁰ In other words, he is saying, 'consider what you hear coming out of these radical individuals! That which they are saying deserves your careful scrutiny!'¹¹ He then refers to these individuals rather passionately¹² using the rhetorical device of alliteration (κύνας. . . κακούς. . . κατατομήν)¹³ to call them a series of derogatory names: first, a name

⁸ Bruce, *Philippians*, 104.

⁹ Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 126.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹¹ G. D. Kilpatrick, "ΒΛΕΠΕΤΕ Philippians 3:2." *In Memoriam Paul Kahle, BZAW*, (Berlin: Verlag Alfred To Palmann, 1928), 146-148.

¹² Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Philippians: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 54.

¹³ Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 124.

typically used by Jews to refer to Gentiles¹⁴ as “zoological lowlife”¹⁵, secondly, a name mocking their emphasis of good works by referring to them as evil workers¹⁶, and finally, a name referring to their covenant keeping practice of circumcision with a twist of not-so-subtle irony¹⁷: a play on words with κατατομήν (mutilation) playing against περιτομή (circumcision).¹⁸

Next, by way of example¹⁹, Paul illustrates the concept of pride in and of the flesh and the achievements thereof. Certainly, he was capable of addressing these issues of the false circumcision (or the mutilators or ‘the snippers’²⁰, as he called them) and of confidence in the flesh because of his own Jewish existence. In fact, by means of another literary device, comparison, Paul shows the magnitude of his achievements and positions:

For we are the circumcision, the ones serving the Spirit of God and boasting in Christ Jesus and not having been persuaded in the flesh, though I might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone thinks (himself to have reason) to have confidence in the flesh, I do much more: circumcision on the eighth day, from the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; regarding the law a Pharisee; according to zeal, persecuting the church; according to righteousness which God requires the in law, being blameless.

Clearly, Paul has fleshly reason to boast, yet he has come to a realization wherein he considers all of these attainments as ‘loss’ (ἧγημαι) or as ‘dung’ (σκύβαλα). Note, it is not a bitterness with which Paul expresses this loss; instead, it is with a note of both thankfulness and humility. Further, through use of the imagery of the business and accounting world²¹, Paul instructs the Philippians that he has counted all of these things as loss (ἡγοῦμαι πάντα

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 295.

¹⁶ Markus Bockmuehl. *The Epistle to the Philippians*. (London: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1998), 189.

¹⁷ Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 125-126.

¹⁸ Bockmuehl, *The Epistle*, 189.

¹⁹ Fee, *Paul’s Letter*, 303.

²⁰ Bruce, *Philippians*, 104.

²¹ Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 139.

ζημίαν) so that he might gain Christ (ἵνα Χριστὸν κερδήσω), thus using additional, familiar comparisons to illustrate the satisfaction and hope that believers should seek through developing and having an intimate knowledge of Christ. In essence (and reiteration), he is dedicatedly pointing his beloved audience to the true purpose of the life of a believer.

On the contrary, I regarded all to be loss in view of the surpassing value of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whom I have suffered all things, and I consider them dung in order that I may gain Christ and that I may be found in Him, not having my righteousness from law, but through the faith of Christ, the righteousness from God on the basis of faith; to know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering, being conformed unto His death if in some way I might attain to the resurrection from the dead.

In contrast to the fleshly way of spiritual attainment and achievement, Paul gives clear indication of his perception of a true worshipper; a person fitting this description would be one who would “worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.”²² Paul desired to model this image for his beloved audience and further sought to confirm its importance to them through the use of imagery and contrasts. Again, his clear intention is to distinguish the difference between the ‘pitiful-ness’ of that which is false and the ‘praise-worthiness’ of that which is true. There is an obvious message in this passage regarding Paul’s eschatology; he clearly believed in a future physical resurrection (as opposed to a realized resurrection that takes place within the believer when s/he comes to know Christ.)²³

Finally, Paul gives instruction regarding the attainment of that goal for which he is striving

Not that I have already received or have been already made perfect, but I keep seeking after so that I might obtain that for which I was made one's own by Christ Jesus. My brothers, I reckon that I myself have not yet obtained: instead, forgetting those things behind and stretching forward to the things ahead, I

²² Philippians 3:3a NASB.

²³ Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 146-147.

seek after the goal-marker of the prize of the upwards calling of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, as many as are complete, let us think [similarly]; and if in anything you all think otherwise, this also God will reveal to you. Nevertheless, in that [which] we have attained, in the same are we to walk.

In this section, Paul is emphatically stating that the epitome of his achievement is not that which he was born into nor that for which he had worked so diligently; instead, his prize was still in front of Him. That goal marker by which he would clearly comprehend his achievement was/is the upward calling of God in Christ Jesus. It is interesting to note that Paul used the aorist tense of λαμβάνω here (ἔλαβον) accompanied by ἤδη, the combination which denotes “a constative aorist collecting Paul’s past experiences up to the time of the present and viewing them as a single whole.”²⁴ In other words, all that Paul had done up until this particular point in his life, cumulatively, had led to this longing desire to be with Christ. He was now experiencing, in part, that which he longed to experience in fullness. In light of this, Paul makes the simple statement, φρονῶμεν, the present active subjunctive 1st person plural of φρονέω, which most probably denotes a hortatory subjunctive;²⁵ this is to be interpreted as “may WE hold this attitude or thought.” Once again, Paul is clearly showing a loving and caring side of himself toward his Philippian brothers and sisters; his love is compelling them to accompany him in having a steadfast desire for a full attainment of all that is meant by being in Christ.

Application

While this same system of Hebrew radicals that Paul addressed may or may not be present within Twenty-First Century America, a pertinent application for the contemporary reader can certainly be derived and applied. This would include a warning against those who would lead others into error, whether through legalism or other false doctrine, and also an

²⁴ Ibid., 151.

²⁵ Ibid., 155.

admonition to the modern Christian to seek to possess the heart of a true worshipper: one who “worship[s] in the Spirit of God”.²⁶

In his contrasts, Paul warned his audience regarding having a sense of confidence in the flesh. Certainly, by human standards in general and by Jewish standards in particular, Paul WAS well-equipped to glory in his humanity. His rearing as a “Hebrew of Hebrews”²⁷ is observed in fullness by his becoming a rabbi at the age of thirty.²⁸ Even his upbringing in the city of Tarsus had equipped him with an access to Hellenistic knowledge and culture that was unequalled by many of those around him²⁹; yet, in the midst of all of Paul’s reasons to glory, he chose to count those once important objectives as loss and instead, he chose to glory in Christ.

The obvious consequential message is that Christians of modernity should beware of the magnetism of pride as it is capable of causing an individual to glory in self and thus, to completely miss the glory of Christ. This pride also has the capability of creating a false sense of self. It further may cause one to revert to the act of becoming as one of the false circumcision about whom Paul had given warning. Stated another way, the believer should count his intelligence, social status, and every other humanly attained aspect, regardless of how well achieved and acknowledged, as loss and instead, should glory in Christ.

As Paul moves further through this brief section of Philippians 3:1-16, he comes to his important theme that there is, most certainly, the greatest value in knowing Christ Jesus and that in such ‘knowledge’ is found hope and direction for one’s life. As an individual gets to ‘know’ Christ, s/he is engaged in a relationship that is both intimate and growing. In fact, the

²⁶ Philippians 3:3a NASB.

²⁷ Philippians 3:5b NIV.

²⁸ ISBE, 710.

²⁹ Ibid., 709-710.

Greek word for “know” here is γινώσκω³⁰ and is used very similarly to its Hebrew counterpart יָדָע³¹ as it is found in Genesis 4:1.³² Here, there is an implication of actual intimate contact between the two persons. This IS the thought used by Paul as he conveys the concept that believers should “know Christ”; there must be an intimate relationship between the Christian and Christ and, further, this relationship is the true meaning of life. This relationship is also a mark of one who “worships in the Spirit of God” (Philippians 3:3a NASB).

Finally, Paul concludes this section with both a testimony and an invitation; his desire is to attain Christ and, further, he compels his audience to join him in his quest for this attainment. As has been previously noted, Paul loved this group of people and he abundantly expressed that love through such terms as ὡς ἐπιποθῶ πάντας ὑμᾶς ἐν σπλάγχνοις Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ (how I long for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus), ἀδελφοί (brothers), and ἀγαπητοί μου (my beloved ones). This love is highly evidenced in Philippians 3:1-16 as Paul has given clear direction and compelling invitation to his friends to join him in his quest to attain Christ. A clear parallel should be seen by the contemporary reader that s/he is also to seek to attain Him.

Finally, there are several issues that seem somewhat confusing when making a ‘surface read’ of the entirety of the book of Philippians in general and the selected passage in particular. First, it seems unusual that Paul would exhort a people to ‘rejoice’ when observed with the understanding that his audience was a much-persecuted people living in a very

³⁰ Fredrick W. Danker, ed. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature: Third Edition (BDAG)* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 199-200.

³¹ Brown-Driver-Briggs' *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962) 393.

³² “And Adam knew Eve his wife...” KJV.

oppressive time and situation. Secondly, the fact that Paul could even commend joy to the people is peculiar because Paul was writing, as has been previously noted, from a place of imprisonment. Certainly, imprisonment would not appear conducive to either the thought or the exercise of joy. Thirdly, Paul was focused on the protection of his friends from these radical Hebrews. This seems unusual, again, because of Paul's imprisonment. It is clear, however, that because of Paul's deep affection for the Philippians, he was not simply seeking to instruct them on a certain topic. Instead, he was acting in the role of a mentor, a friend, an encourager, and perhaps even a pastor; he was specifically concerned for the well-being of this dearly-loved people.

It also seems that Paul, in addressing the concepts of 'laying hold of' and 'attaining', is speaking to real problems that were taking place at that time. Perhaps there were individuals who were influential to the Philippian church who did imagine that "they [had] laid hold on perfection."³³ As he speaks to that issue, he is reminding the reader, both then and now, that he, as a runner in a race, "practices persistent concentration on one, and only one, objective, namely, to press on toward the goal of the high prize. He permits nothing to divert him from his course."³⁴ So, too, this admonition to remain focused should be considered by the reader today as s/he struggles to maintain his/her identity in Christ.

Conclusion

As further application for this passage is sought for modernity, it is important that one seeks to keep his/her focus on Christ with remembrance that the goal is to count all natural successes as rubbish so that Christ may be gained. This is not to negate educational pursuits, prestigious efforts, or attainment desires; instead, the emphasized goal is that believers may be

³³ Hendriksen, *Philippians*, 172.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

found in Christ. This should be deemed as the act of NOT having a false sense of pride and self-aggrandizement. Further, it should be construed also as not having a false righteousness derived from the Law, like these previously mentioned radical Hebrews. Instead, the believer should take rest and satisfaction only in that which comes through faith in Christ Jesus. It is to this ultimate goal that Paul was admonishing his Philippian friends. It is to this same ultimate goal that believers of the Twenty-First Century are to be challenged and encouraged. With this thought in mind, it might be supposed that if Paul were to pen this same passage in contemporary English, it might perhaps be written as follows:

And finally, my dear friends, be sure that you are full of joy from the Lord. You see, even though I have written this in the past and am writing you again in a very repetitious manner; it is no trouble for me. You must realize, however, that it is a message of precaution and care for you.

Be on the alert for those dogs. Be cautious of evil workers. Yes, even be aware of those phony believers. You see, we are the true believers; we worship in the Spirit of God and put our glory in Christ Jesus. In fact, we put no confidence in the flesh. Now I want to remind you, I actually do have good and just cause to have earthly confidence. In fact, if anyone has a reason to put confidence in the flesh, I have more than you all do. I have all of the right pedigree: circumcised on the eighth day, a descendent of the nation of Israel; in particular of the tribe of Benjamin. In fact, I am a Hebrew of Hebrews. Moreover, concerning obedience to the Law, I was a Pharisee and thus, followed the Law to perfection. Regarding my enthusiasm, I was a zealous persecutor of the church, and regarding the righteousness that is in the Law, I was found blameless.

Nevertheless, for all of those things that made me look impressive, I now count them as loss for the sake of Christ. Even more than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of intimately knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. In fact, for Him I have suffered the loss of all things, but that's okay. I count them as mere garbage so that I may gain Christ and that I may be found in Him. You see, I do not want to have a righteousness of my own which is earned through obedience to the Law. Instead, I want that which is given through faith in Christ; the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Him and to experience both the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings. I want to be identified in His death so that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. I want to fully know Him!" Now keep in mind, not that I have already received or have been already made perfect, but I keep on seeking after Him so that I might fully obtain that for which I was made. You see, I was made His own by Christ Jesus

My brothers, I know that I myself have not yet fully obtained all that there is to gain in Him: However, forgetting all of those things which I have now left behind, and instead, stretching forward to the things He has ahead for me, I am pursuing the finish line and therefore the prize of the high calling of God; that which is in Christ Jesus.

Therefore, to those of you who are in Him, let us think with similar hearts, minds and attitudes; and if any of you think otherwise, God will clearly show it to you. Nevertheless, keep this in mind, that which we have already learned and know, let's walk in it.³⁵

As this writing is observed in contemporary paraphrase, it hopefully becomes obvious that Paul had a desire for his friends to fully experience Christ. As the contemporary reader pursues this passage in similar manner, it rests within that reader to receive this word and, further, to act upon it.

³⁵ This is a personal paraphrase based upon my 'wooden' translation.

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